THE MISSOURI BOOT-HEEL

By Constance E. H. Daniel

The cotton counties of Southeast Missouri may be the proving ground of democracy, asserts this writer, citing the experiments under way there. Ed.

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"The last agricultural frontier in America," "a racial borderline," "a tension point where the thought life of North and South clash" -- so does the Missouri "boot-heel" appear to those who labor with its problems.

Negro farming in Missouri is concentrated in this area, but that concentration, as figures go, is of little significance -- less than four thousand Negro farmers for all seven counties. Nor is the figure for white farmers in these counties -- slightly over 20,000 -- particularly impressive. More spectacular figures could be assembled for hundreds of counties south of "the line." The importance of the area lies in other directions.

Agriculturally, the "boot-heel" belongs with the Delta counties of Arkansas and Mississippi, with cotton the principal crop, controlling both social and economic patterns.

But Southeast Missouri, following the crop patterns of the Deep South and the outward form, at least, of its social patterns, has never wholly accepted its thinking. Since the days of the Missouri Compromise, many of those, white and Negro, who make up its population, have been foreign to the land and have carried to it the conflicting philosophies of other regions.

This non-conformity of thought in the "boot-heel" counties has swept to the surface problems that give the area significance as a reflector of socio-economic disorders affecting all Southern agriculture, and as a proving ground for possible remedies for these disorders.

One of the prevailing theories on the racial aspects of Southeast Missouri's troubles is that Negroes from further South, anxious to realize freedom from habitual restraint, drift easily into laxities that invite economic disaster.

Without doubt there are drifters and ne'er-do-wells in this as in all other groups of the venturesome -- or persevering -- seeking promised lands. But the presence of large numbers of white agricultural workers, living as poorly and as precariously, would seem to discount the theory that lowered efficiency has resulted from relatively rapid lightening of purely racial pressures.

Before and since the now famous sharecropper walkout of 1939, when two thousand croppers and their families fled to the Missouri highways in protest against evictions, big operators have been accused of fostering a "divided you fall" policy among white and black tenant farmers, with all its corollaries of inflammatory racial emphasis, and threats of still less land for the needy.

On the other hand, croppers working under relatively good conditions have been accused of agitating in the hope of obtaining Government aid.

Few are in a position to know the merits of either charge. That there was a dramatic exodus to the roads is now Missouri history.

Perhaps only in Missouri could such a demonstration as that which filled her snow-covered highways with tattered, shivering farmers, white and black, have been led by a Negro.

Perhaps only in Missouri could the cause of such a group have found open support from members of the planter class itself.

Both phenomena occurred. Race lines were crossed; class lines were crossed; and the drama of Southeast Missouri's croppers ended around the council table, with all groups represented.

The problems discussed around that table by Owen Whitfield, the Negro cropper, Thad Snow, the planter, Governor Stark, and others, still exist. No spot-cures have been found for any of agriculture's ills. Long before the demonstration, some forward-looking steps had been taken in the "boot-heel." Since the demonstration, more have been developed. Whether these constitute temporary relief or are part of a definite answer to the problem of population pressure on the land, remains to be seen.

Problem of Pressure

Whatever the answer, however, in the last analysis, the problem in Southeast Missouri, as in the Deep South, is one of population pressure. Evictions may or may not have been due, as charged, to the unwillingness of landowners to share crop reduction "benefit checks" with tenants whose acreage was affected, as is required by law.

There may or may not be truth in assertions that control of the tenant's vote was in many instances the owner's price for a place on his land.

If neither was true the problem would still exist. If there was truth in either charge, the abuse was made possible by the pressure.

One step, taken before the demonstration, was the establishment near Sikeston, Missouri, of the La Forge Project. There, one hundred families of destitute sharecroppers and day laborers, about equally divided between the two races, were located on 6,700 acres of land in Scott and New Madrid counties.

The families accepted for residence at La Forge, in 1937, were those already existing on the land, living in typical croppers' shacks, little better than sheds, eating whatever they could when there was anything to eat. Farm Security workers reported many who were seriously underweight from lack of food.

There was none of the usual selection of families here. At this place, Farm Security took what it found -- superior families whose morale and resources had been sapped by constant moving; stranded day laborers; croppers without land to crop, and for whom there was no choice but to join the swelling ranks of migrants on the highways leading west.

A non-selective group of down-and-out farm folk was being given a chance to make good--just provided with decent, inexpensive housing, and tools and mules to work the land. Could such families succeed?

La Forge Succeeding

They are succeeding. Living in durable four and five-room farm cottages, with good barns, wells, sanitary privies and simple food storage vaults, La Forge farmers, their first year, paid a cash rent of $50 per unit plus one-fourth of their cotton crop. Since then, rents have been paid entirely in cash from crop income, at an average rent of $220 per unit.

Costs, including land and all construction, ranged from $5,330 for units with two-bedroom houses, to $5,912 for three-bedroom units. The houses alone cost $1,028 and $1,217 respectively, according to size. Houses built by Farm Security here, as elsewhere, have a life-expectancy of forty years -- an important consideration to both the government and the family involved in planning for permanency of housing.

Ordinarily, croppers don't have gardens because they are not permitted to have them. Given the chance, La Forge families began making theirs before their houses were complete. The garden acreage for the hundred families rose from six acres in 1937, to sixty acres in 1939-40.

There was a corresponding change in crops and livestock. Acreage in hay and legumes for the hundred farmsteads increased from 200 to 2,000 acres. Cotton acreage dropped from 3,500 to 1,725; wheat from 475 to 90 acres. Milk cows increased from 25 to 115; hogs from 60 to 1,000; chickens from 600 to 5,000; and mules from 80 to 200.

At the end of La Forge's second year, the 100 farm wives had canned more than 50,000 quarts of produce from their gardens. The cooperative use of farm machinery provided each family with necessary equipment at a cost to each of $220. The same equipment, purchased individually, would have cost $900 per family. Without the equipment, successful competition with the area's large commercial units would have been impossible.

The La Forge cooperative runs a cotton gin, a store, sire service and a blacksmith shop. This cooperative has paid an annual rent of $7,500 to the Government and is now a year ahead with payments on its operating loan. The 100 families will receive some $3,500 in profits after the extra year's payment is made. With two or three exceptions, the families at La Forge have met all their obligations to the Government, including rent and payment on equipment and livestock loans.

Of most significance to these hundred former croppers, black and white, has been the chance to direct their own affairs -- to make their own decisions, and to plan together toward the day when all assistance from the Government, technical or financial, will have ceased, and the La Forge community will be entirely "on its own."

But La Forge, realistic and fundamental as it is, is yet a pattern. The hundred homesteaders there are a concrete statement of sharecropper possibilities, not an indication of the way toward a large-scale solution of the small farmer's problems.

The sharecropper demonstration, however it may have been intended, was an equally definite statement of those problems -- too many people for the available land, and a steady shrinkage in the number of farm units on that land.

Machines for Men

The racial implications in the situation were slight. Farm workers and farmers, black and white, were being displaced by machinery. Their realization of their common plight was clearly evidenced by their attitude of mutual support under extremely difficult conditions throughout the demonstration and after it.

The croppers knew that whatever the contributory factors might be, they were being replaced mainly because tractor-power, on a per hour basis of work accomplished, and on an annual basis of over-all expense, was cheaper than manpower. For every small farmer forced off the land by the unequal competition of power-farming, a farm is "lost". The census registers one farm less, while a big unit simultaneously expands by the sixty, or eighty or one hundred acres that were in the "lost" farm.

In the past five years, 16,146 farms have been "lost" in Missouri. Many of these were in the rich delta lands of the "boot-heel." Estimating these units conservatively at sixty-five acres each, that is more than a million acres in family-sized farms lost to one state -- a state that is listed as one of the five contributing most heavily to Pacific Coast migration.

Under Phillip G. Beck, Regional Director for the Farm Security Administration, a five-way program for making small farms workable and stabilizing living conditions among farm workers, has been started in the seven cotton counties.

The standard rehabilitation loan program, providing farmers with short-term, five per cent loans for the purchase of working equipment and livestock, is being rapidly expanded, as a first means of relieving pressure.

Group Labor Homes

As a second measure, productive land is being acquired wherever this is available and group labor homes for agricultural workers constructed on it. These homes, built at a cost of $750 each, are rented at an annual rate averaging four to five percent of construction costs. In Mississippi, New Madrid, and Pemiscot counties, just beyond the spillway of the Mississippi, group labor units are already providing landless croppers with homes and a livelihood.

Still another part of the program is the long-term leasing of large tracts, subsequently subleased to FSA borrowers.

At Portage Farms, in Pemiscot county, on the Arkansas border, both Negro and white families are successfully working the land on a leasing cooperative of this type. As at Hill House in Mississippi, a mixed board of Negro and white homesteaders directs farm activities.

In contrast to the group labor homes are the scattered labor homes -- a fourth development aimed to encourage the retention of agricultural labor on the land under satisfactory conditions.

Scattered labor homes are built on land provided by cooperating owners, and are occupied rent free by sharecroppers working for the owners, and growing subsistence gardens and stock feed and raising cattle, hogs, and poultry with technical help from Farm Security workers. Security of tenure is assured under Government-landlord agreements, safeguarding the rights of both cropper and owner. Seventy per cent of the construction cost of $500 is borne by the owner, who also provides three acres for the farmstead.

There is food for thought in an area where "a sharecropper with a piece of land to work is a person to be envied."

Finally, a labor rehabilitation plan supplies garden seed, canning equipment and similar needs to day laborers, where such families can secure small tracts of land to cultivate, rent free. There again, controlling owners are brought into the program on a cooperating basis.

Southeast Missouri has become acutely conscious of two questions of growing import to Southern farming:

Is there any security short of ownership?

Is there economy in an increased income based on the displacement of families who, if not supported directly by the land they do work, must eventually be supported indirectly by the land they do not work?

Planters are wondering -- and watching. Some are showing more than casual interest in the new program. Croppers and small farmers are watching also.

There has been much talk about what constitutes an "economic unit" in terms of agricultural operations. An agricultural college sophomore could recite the formula. But Southeast Missouri, that has been living in the most approved "economic" style, is learning the hard way that cheaply produced crops alone, provide security for no one. It is harvesting the results that economic theorists shrug away.

It may be that the agricultural developments now going on in the Missouri proving ground will answer the question of democracy's ability to include the meeting of human need in its criteria for the operations of "economic units" of any kind.

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